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SUBJECT: DFM KARASIN ON GEORGIA AND U.S. RELATIONS - MEETING
WITH CODEL DELAHUNT

11. (SBU) Summary: In a December 6 meeting with Congressman Bill Delahunt and Congressman Dana Rohrabacher, Deputy Foreign Minister Karasin conceded Russia had lost the p.r. battle in the August conflict with Georgia, but reiterated why Russia had been compelled to respond militarily and then recognize South Ossetia and Abkhazia. He welcomed changing assessments of Saakashvili's role in the conflict and insisted Russia sought "friendly, normal" relations with Georgia. Karasin argued against "endless" discussions in Geneva, and urged direct engagement between the parties -- Georgia, South Ossetia and Abkhazia -- to resolve practical questions. Emphasizing Russia's multiethnic nature, Karasin said the principle of self-determination was not "an idle question" for Russia. Karasin welcomed more "realism" in U.S.-Russia relations, advocated the rescinding of Jackson-Vanik as a signal that relations would be based on mutual respect, flagged an end to NATO enlargement and missile defense plan in Poland and the Czech Republic as critical to future relations, and agreed on the need for greater civilian nuclear cooperation. Karasin was receptive to greater cooperation on Afghanistan, but stressed that the U.S. and Russia needed to "pre-cook" initiatives. End Summary

Russia Falls Down on Hill

12. (SBU) In a 75-minute December 6 meeting with Congressman Delahunt (D, Mass), Congressman Rohrabacher (R, CA), and the Ambassador, Deputy Foreign Minister Karasin welcomed parliamentary exchanges and expressed appreciation for the work of the Ambassador, along with the hope that Russia's Ambassador to the U.S. Kislyak was accorded the same access. Congressman Delahunt agreed on the need to reinvigorate parliamentary dialogues and, underscoring that the delegation did not speak for the Administration, encouraged the GOR to "work the Hill" more effectively. Noting that the August events in Georgia had sparked his interest in traveling to Russia, Congressman Delahunt commented that many legislators were not familiar with the history of the dispute, particularly given an agenda crowded by Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Middle East, as well as the challenges posed by the international economic crisis. Congressman Delahunt noted that one positive side-effect of the August conflict would be greater interest in U.S.-Russian relations, and pointed to the upcoming delegation visits led by Congressman Tauscher and Senator Lugar, with Senator Kerry expected to travel to Russia in early 12009. As the allocators, the House of Representatives would play a particularly important role, with Congressman Rohrabacher noting that the Administration had to seek additional funding for its initiatives with Georgia. In response to Congressman Rohrabacher's skepticism over the Administration's position towards

Georgia, Karasin replied that "I have to join your ranks."

Georgia: Saakashvili Tipped the Scales

13. (SBU) Karasin reviewed Russia's relations towards the Caucasus, characterizing the U.S. and Russian policy positions as "quite close" before the August conflict. Karasin stressed that the U.S. and Russia had been united in support of the peacekeeping process, in reaching long-term settlements to the Georgia-South Ossetia and Georgia-Abkhazia disputes, and in pushing the sides to adopt a no-use-of-force pledge. Saakashvili's decision to take South Ossetia "by storm" was irresponsible. Noting that bloodshed in the Caucasus is a question "for the ages," Karasin concluded that Saakashvili had produced the "complete ruin" of Georgian aspirations for territorial integrity. Russia, he said forcefully, had no choice but to beat back the Georgian aggression, preemptively destroy Georgian military infrastructure, and recognize the conflict territories. Noting Russia's restraint in not undertaking tit-for-tat recognition post-Kosovo, Karasin blamed Saakashvili for upsetting the policy balance. By spoiling relations with the U.S. and EU (sic), and in destroying relations with Russia, Karasin maintained that Saakashvili had ended Georgia's chances for territorial integrity. Karasin termed the December 5 firing of the Georgian foreign and defense ministers as an effort to change the face of an administration that had failed. At the same time, Karasin welcomed the appointment of FM Vashadze and the new Minister of Culture Abashidze, as "partners and

MOSCOW 00003615 002 OF 004

colleagues."

14. (SBU) Karasin stressed that Russia sought "normal, friendly" relations with Georgia and would work to overcome the "irresponsibility and stupidity" of the Georgian government; however, the situation had changed "cardinally" after August. Karasin called for greater realism in Washington on this count. Congressman Delahunt acknowledged that most Americans and most members of Congress had paid insufficient attention to the U.S.-Russia relationship, and expressed regret that members did not fulfill their responsibility in that regard. At the same time, he noted, Russia had failed to make its case to the American public and U.S. Congress. Congressman Delahunt contrasted Russia's performance to Saakashvili's adroit media management and congressional outreach. Karasin agreed that Saakashvili was smart, and took Congressman Delahunt's point that the Georgian President had used his personal relations in Washington to effectively present Georgia's case, with Russia "losing" the PR battle. Congressman Delahunt noted that, after initially supporting Georgia, some members were raising serious questions regarding Georgia's performance, its human rights record, its support for press freedom, and the temperament of Saakashvili. Over time, Congressman Delahunt commented, a new view of Georgia had emerged among key members in both the House and Senate that was more skeptical of Saakashvili. Congressman Delahunt speculated over the potential consequences had Georgia been a member of NATO at the time of the clash.

15. (SBU) In response to Congressman Delahunt's comment that Russia's decision to recognize South Ossetia and Abkhazia could have been deferred, Karasin replied that practical politics dictated the policy shift. Karasin said Russia had to demonstrate that a military attack by Georgia was no longer possible. Before August 7, Medvedev, Putin and FM Lavrov had emphasized that Russia would pursue a "responsible and sober" line; after August 7, absent an "immediate and forceful" response, Georgia

would have been tempted to attack again. Congressman Delahunt underscored that a resumption of military conflict by Georgia would spell the end of support for the Saakashvili government. If Saakashvili ignored the Administration, as A/S Fried testified that Saakashvili had done in not heeding U.S. warnings against the use of military force in August, the U.S. would have to conclude that Georgia did not take American interests into account.

¶6. (SBU) Karasin underscored the emotional element also at play in Caucasus politics. The Caucasus is "not Central Europe or Holland," but a collection of "emotional nations." Russia had been under pressure for the last fifteen years by Russian political parties, domestic political opinion, and the North Caucasus republics, to recognize South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Successive Russian leaders had abstained, and Russia had been prepared for a long-term, peaceful process resulting in a unified Georgia. Russia wanted a good neighbor, not a threat. Expressing appreciation for the blunt views presented by the Congressmen on Saakashvili, Karasin argued that had those blunt assessments come into play two years earlier, "we would have had a different outcome."

¶7. (SBU) Karasin said the U.S. should convince Georgia to focus on building responsible relations with South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and reiterated his criticism of Saakashvili. The Ambassador interjected that a focus on who started the conflict would be inconclusive, and that blame could be assigned to both sides, but that it was imperative to use the Geneva talks to move ahead. Keeping in mind the Russian warning over the nature of Caucasus blood feuds, the Ambassador stressed the importance of all parties sitting at the table and being encouraged to move forward on resolving the issues related to security and the internally displaced. Karasin rejected Russian culpability and responded that Geneva could not be "endless." While Russia would participate in December, it wanted to work with the U.S. and EU to get the parties -- Georgia, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia -- to work together directly on practical questions. Karasin commented that the South Ossetians felt that they were being subjected to particular international scrutiny, while Georgia needed to be pushed to become more predictable. Commenting that it was Russia's neighborhood and reiterating that he did not

MOSCOW 00003615 003.2 OF 004

represent the Administration nor the majority's view in Congress towards Russia, Congressman Rohrabacher called for Russia and Georgia to broker their differences bilaterally, without U.S. interference. The Ambassador agreed that this was not the Administration's position, and said the Geneva talks showed the value of multilateral diplomacy.

Kosovo, Self-Determination, and Georgia

¶8. (SBU) Congressman Rohrabacher stressed his support for the principle of self-determination and noted his record of supporting Georgia's emergence as an independent state under President Gamsakhurdia. Congressman Rohrabacher argued that Kosovo's independence -- which he had championed -- created a precedent that did apply to the two breakaway republics, with Russia acting in the right to recognize their aspirations. Reiterating that it was important to be upfront about the consequences of Kosovo, Congressman Rohrabacher commented that recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia was reasonable. On the principle of self-determination, Karasin said it was not an idle question for the Russian leadership, given Russia's multiethnic makeup. Not only were there national republics within Russia, Russia's

major cities all had multiethnic populations, with over one million Georgians comprising a significant portion of Russia's artistic and scientific elite. There were compelling reasons not to recognize South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Karasin admitted, but Georgian actions had nullified them.

U.S.-Russian Relations: NATO, MD, Jackson-Vanik, 123

¶9. (SBU) Congressman Delahunt stressed the importance of lowering the rhetoric and reestablishing mutual respect in U.S.-Russian relations. Noting his view that Saakashvili was the aggressor in the August conflict, Congressman Rohrabacher characterized the subsequent U.S.-Russia confrontation as unfortunate and called for a more frank dialogue, in order to move forward under a new U.S. administration. Karasin agreed on the need to think more expansively about the scope of U.S.-Russian engagement. In response to Congressman Rohrabacher's comments that Georgian membership in NATO would be disastrous, Karasin stressed that it was a choice for NATO members to make, nor for Georgia to decide. NATO members should not play a game, he warned, but have to take responsibility for what they set in motion for long-term security. While NATO could absorb "one, then two, and three states" from Russia's "sphere-of-influence" in the short-term, in doing so it set in motion new problems and tensions.

¶10. (SBU) Karasin commented that regardless of NATO-Russia Council efforts, the Russian political and military establishment still feared NATO and "no one can kill that fear." When Gorbachev had proposed "new thinking" about European security, the chance had been lost. Karasin argued that a new generation of Russian and U.S. military could arrive at a new understanding of security. Congressman Rohrabacher added that the Georgia crisis would be a catalyst for new thinking on NATO, with his personal view that NATO was increasingly a Cold War relic. Karasin clarified that Russia did not fear the EU's expansion, and viewed politics based on economics in a fundamentally different light. Nevertheless, Karasin ruled out the possibility of Russia joining the EU, commenting that inviting Russia would be akin to swallowing an elephant; however, Russia sought partnership with the EU. Congressman Rohrabacher observed that with many EU markets frozen to Russian companies, India and not China was the natural market. Karasin agreed that "China is another story."

¶11. (SBU) Asked for ideas on how to demonstrate a new U.S. approach to Russia, Karasin said that the most important symbol of the current dysfunctional relationship was Jackson-Vanik. While some officials sought to "tease" Russia with new conditions for its removal, if the U.S. were to unilaterally rescind it without any negotiations, but as an "outright gesture," the Russian leadership and public would take notice. Reviewing U.S. missile defense plans in Europe was another issue that could transform U.S.-Russian relations. "Is missile defense in Poland and the Czech Republic really necessary? Who is the genius behind this

MOSCOW 00003615 004 OF 004

idea?" Arguing that current plans did not make the U.S. safer, Karasin called for a return to the drawing board, with Congressman Rohrabacher noting then-President Reagan's vision of a joint U.S.-Russia missile defense shield.

¶12. (SBU) Congressman Rohrabacher pointed to cooperation in civilian nuclear energy ("123") as one example where relations should be revitalized quickly and highlighted the possibility of U.S.-Russian nuclear cooperation in India. Noting his advocacy of the high

temperature-gas cooled reactor, which was developed by Russian scientists, Congressman Rohrabacher commented that the fact it did not produce weapons-grade waste made it a preferred export model, including to countries like Venezuela, where Russia had business interests.

Afghanistan

13. (SBU) Explaining that his portfolio covered Central Asia, Karasin queried the Congressmen on the "real intentions" of the new Administration, including in Afghanistan. Congressman Delahunt said that he expected campaign promises to be honored, which would produce a withdrawal from Iraq, with the exception of a residual force, and a broadening of the dialogue on Iran. While it would take time to reestablish diplomatic relations, Congressman Delahunt noted that contacts existed between Congress and the Iranian majlis that could be expanded. In response to Congressman Rohrabacher's assessment that the U.S. and Russia could do more together in Afghanistan, Karasin agreed but said that cooperation would need to be worked out in advance ("like they do in the EU"). Wrapping up the meeting, Karasin said that if the U.S. and Russia could "pre-agree" on initiatives, they would be easier to implement, including with Kabul.

BEYRLE